



UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA

ALBERTA CENTRE
FOR SUSTAINABLE
RURAL COMMUNITIES

THE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF MEN'S SHEDS IN RURAL ALBERTA



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About the ACSRC

The Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities (ACSRC) at the University of Alberta has, since its founding in 2009, assisted rural communities in meeting diverse challenges across many areas of public policy through fostering constructive dialogue, promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and developing partnerships.

The Centre's mission is to link the research, outreach and educational capacity of the University of Alberta with students, researchers, rural communities, rural community organizations and policy makers at multiple levels across the province, nationally, and internationally in order to support the improved sustainability of rural communities and populations.

Thinking respectfully and reciprocally with, not just for, rural communities is a main objective of the ACSRC. Through dialogue and collaboration, the Centre operates an outreach program that provides direction and stimulates innovation in the development of rural communities. This is built around various collaborations with educational institutions, municipalities and not-for profit organizations on research projects that seek to create resilient rural communities across Alberta.

Over the past thirteen years, the ACSRC has received roughly \$3 million in direct funding from a wide assortment of academic and government sources; developed partnerships with over 140 community organizations, post-secondary institutions, rural municipalities, and research centres, and has employed over 150 research staff.

Recently, we have been engaged in rural-focussed projects related to sustainable economic development opportunities, community mental health, the delivery of social services, enhancing inclusivity, advancing the transition to renewable energy, aiding municipal collaboration, and better understanding rural public opinion and rural-based populism.

To read more about us and the work we do, please visit acsrc.ca

Executive Summary

Men's Sheds are a bottom-up, community-driven approach, designed to support retired and older men's mental health. These Sheds consist of communal spaces where men can regularly meet to socialize and work on projects "shoulder-to-shoulder" such as woodworking, metalworking, cooking, bike repairs and other projects. By creating an environment when men can engage and work with one another in an informal, open, and forgiving atmosphere, and with a community-related purpose, Men's Sheds are meant to promote social inclusion, camaraderie, purpose, and ultimately, as it is often quipped in the Men's Shed world, "health by stealth."

Thus far, the academic research completed on Men's Sheds is nearly unanimous with respect to the positive benefits for men who participate. In summary, Men's Sheds provide opportunities for participants to make new friends, contribute to their community, enhance their sense of belonging, provide a sense of structure to their lives, and talk openly about their ongoing concerns. In the process, men have frequently benefited from the positive outcomes related to their overall physical and mental health. However, most of these studies have focussed on Sheds in urban settings.

Rural areas across Canada continue to lack adequate mental health resources and support for non-urban residents. In addition, rural citizens, especially older men, are often more reluctant to access mental health resources than their urban counterparts that do exist. This is problematic given that rurality is one of the most prevalent risk factors for suicide and other mental health issues.

Given these realities, this study was designed to evaluate the impacts and effectiveness of two Men's Sheds in rural Alberta, with an overarching interest in whether Men's Sheds represent an effective, community-based form of support for participants that rural municipalities ought to be supporting.

Through the analysis of twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews we completed with participants from Men's Sheds in Cold Lake and Camrose, Alberta, we demonstrate that Shed participants enjoy a wide range of clear mental health benefits, related especially to the positive outcomes associated with the Camaraderie, the Sense of Inclusion, and the Sense of Belonging, they experience as active members of these sheds.

Although Men's Sheds should not be viewed as a panacea for the complex and widespread problem that a lack of proper mental health supports presents for rural communities, given these clear results, we assert that supporting the formation of new Men's Sheds throughout rural areas represents a worthwhile investment in the mental health of a group of vulnerable citizens on behalf of rural municipalities and provincial governments.



WHAT IS A MEN'S SHED?

Men's Sheds are a bottom-up, community-driven approach, often led by one or more of the men themselves, designed to support retired and older men's mental health. These Sheds are communal spaces where men can regularly meet to socialize and work on projects "shoulder-to-shoulder" such as woodworking, metalworking, cooking, bike repairs and, as the Canada Men's Shed website notes, "yelling at the television during the playoffs"! Importantly, the projects that men work on during their time in the Shed (building things like birdhouses, park benches, and planter boxes) are often donated to various community organizations, thereby creating an important sense of community service for the men.

The History of Men's Sheds

The history of Men's Sheds stretches back to the 1980s where they began forming in Australia as a community-level support designed to assist older men with the transition into retirement. The Australian Men's Shed Association now claims over 900 member Sheds and, in recent years, they have grown in popularity across Ireland, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and, increasingly, the United States and Canada. Canada's first Shed was opened in Winnipeg in 2011 and its founder, Doug Mackie, was awarded the Manitoba Lieutenant Governor's "Make a Difference Community Award" for his efforts in helping "men come together, stay productive, and contribute to the community."¹ As of 2020, there were an estimated 40 Men's Sheds in operation across Canada (although that number may have declined due to complications related to the Covid-19 pandemic).²

By creating an environment when men can engage and work with one another in an informal, open, and forgiving atmosphere, and with a community-related purpose, Men's Sheds are meant to promote social inclusion, camaraderie, purpose, and ultimately, as it is often quipped in the Men's Shed world, "health by stealth."³ That is, Men's Sheds can often entice participants to "open up" in conversation with peers "in the context of doing something together, side by side...[often about issues that are] critically important aspects of their health and wellbeing."⁴ In other words, in having older men get together in a Shed, often to work together on a project, these programs not only provide participants with "something to do," but they also create opportunities for conversation. This opportunity to converse during purposefully-driven work can, over time, allow for the sharing of personal struggles related to men's mental and/or physical well-being, and for receiving support from other members who often experience similar struggles in their own lives.

Academic Research

Thus far, the academic research completed on Men's Sheds across Australia, Europe and Canada is nearly unanimous with respect to the positive benefits for men who participate. In summary, Men's Sheds provide opportunities for participants to make new friends, contribute to their community, enhance their sense of belonging, provide a sense of structure to their lives, and talk openly about their ongoing concerns. In the process, men have frequently benefited from the positive outcomes related to their overall physical and mental health.⁵

The Lack of Mental Health Supports in Rural Communities

The overarching concern that animated this project is the fact that, despite growing awareness of the need for such services, rural areas across Canada continue to lack adequate mental health resources and support for non-urban residents. In addition, rural citizens, are often more reluctant to access mental health resources than their urban counterparts. When these resources are available, efforts to access or utilize supports are often low, either due to a lack of awareness, or, more likely, the strong stigma that continues to exist in rural communities around mental health issues. This is especially problematic given that rurality is one of the most prevalent risk factors for suicide and other mental health issues. Rural males are more than two times more likely to die by suicide than urban males and older men, especially those in the early years of retirement, frequently struggle with a loss of identity, confidence, and deterioration in mental and physical health and are among the most vulnerable in rural communities.⁶

Our Study

Key Questions

As noted previously, several studies have already documented the wide range of positive benefits associated with participating in a Men's Shed. However, nearly all of the research conducted on Men's Sheds has been completed in urban areas.

- What of rural areas and rural residents? Are these same benefits found in rural Sheds?
- Do rural men, often more reluctant than urban men to access traditional mental health supports, experience these Sheds in similar ways as urban participants?
- Given the relative lack of traditional mental health supports in rural areas, do Men's Sheds represent an effective, community-based form of support that can help fill part of this gap?

Ultimately, we sought to understand whether rural-based Men's Sheds in Alberta are generating positive mental health outcomes for their members and thus should be aggressively supported in rural communities that lack broader mental health resources.

Methodology

On the advice of members of Canada's National Men's Shed association, we identified Sheds in the small cities of Camrose and Cold Lake as being the most active in rural Alberta.

We recruited a total of 12 participants for our study:

- 7 were members of the Camrose Men's Shed
- 5 were from the Cold Lake Men's Shed

Each participant completed a short questionnaire that asked them for some basic sociodemographic information as well as to rate their experiences with their Men's Shed.

Then, they took part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview with a member of the research team, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes.

Four additional interviews were conducted, one with a representative of the local social service agency that oversees each Men's Shed, as well as one with the informal "leader" of each Men's Shed, as a means of providing some context with respect to the history of each Shed and the broader community of which it was a part.

Demographics

The demographic make-up of the research sample for this study was within that expected for a rural Men's Shed.

- Eleven of the twelve men were over the age of 60, with nine over 65 and seven over 70
- Ten of the twelve men interviewed for this study were retired, with the remaining two continuing to work part-time
- All but two identified as "white"
- Eleven of twelve had not attained a university degree
- Eleven men were married, and one was divorced

Camrose Men's Shed

Camrose is located in East Central Alberta, has a population of 18,520, and serves as the major service centre for a much larger rural region that is heavily dependent on the agriculture and oil and gas sectors. The Men's Shed has been in operation for approximately 10 years and receives support from Camrose and District Support Services. The "Shed" is a building within the Camrose and District Museum which is owned and administered by the City of Camrose and provided to the group at no charge.

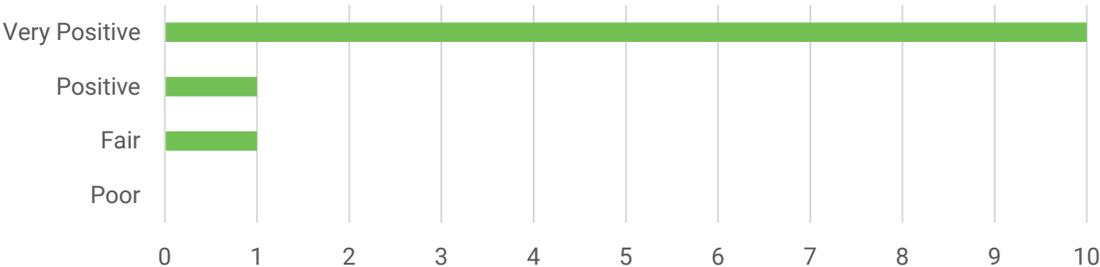
Cold Lake Men's Shed

Cold Lake is located in Northeastern Alberta, and has a population of 15,661, but it also serves as the major service centre for a much larger rural region that is heavily dependent on the agriculture and oil and gas sectors, in addition to the sizable Canadian Forces Base located in the region. The Cold Lake Men's Shed is relatively new, having been established in 2019. Initially, the Shed was drawing in the neighbourhood of 30 men, although they largely ceased normal operating for two years due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and, as of the summer of 2022, were only drawing 4-5 men per meeting. The Shed is supported with a modest budget by Age Friendly Cold Lake.

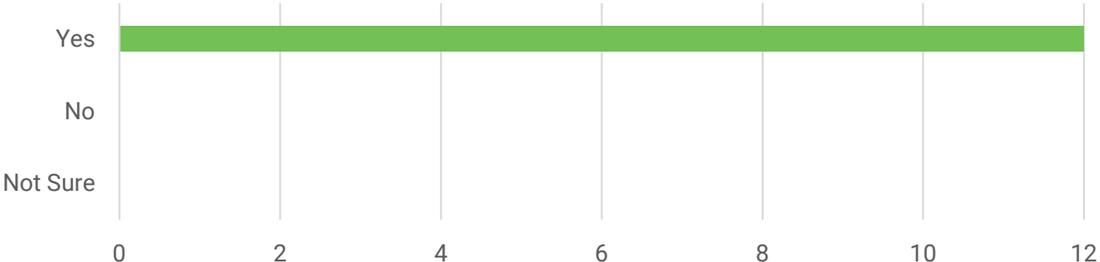
Key Findings

Our work with both groups left little room for doubt. In both Camrose and Cold Lake Men's Sheds, participants are having very positive experiences and are enjoying a wide variety of mental health benefits. The survey results generated very positive responses from participants across a range of questions.

How would you rate your experiences with the Men's Shed Program?



Have your experiences with the Men's' Shed improved your Mental Health?

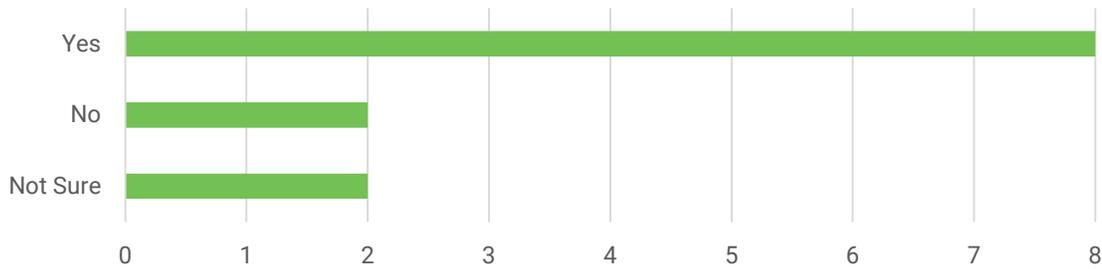


"I'd say [my mental health] is about a five [out of ten]...but it helps coming here because I can talk to other guys who have gone through...what I've gone through. Or, like, they've had experiences that I can relate with so we can talk with each other and learn and just kind of vent and get stuff out. Because if you hold it in, I know it hurts in more ways than one."

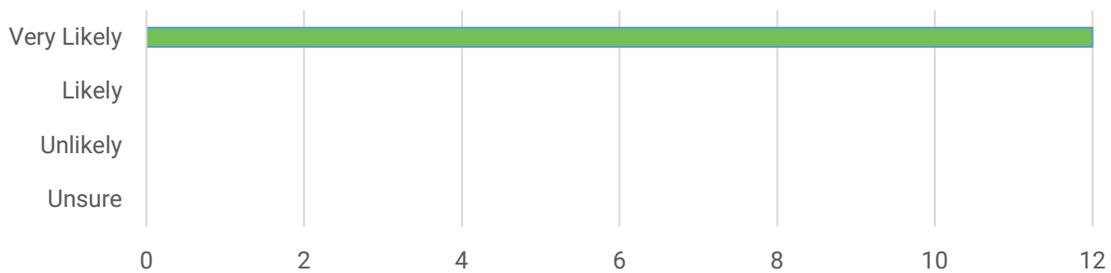
-Max, participant of a rural Alberta Men's Shed

Key Findings - con't

Have your experiences with the Men's' Shed improved your Physical Health?



How likely are you to recommend joining a Men's' Shed to your friends or family members?



“Later on in life I went into depression...I have good days, I have bad days. But what I’m telling you now, basically, is how this Men’s Shed has helped me...it’s the best thing that ever happened to me...and I love it here...I wait for it every week.”

-Scott, participant of a rural Alberta Men’s Shed

During the semi-structured interviews of this study, literally every single participant of this study had something positive to say about the general mental health benefits their participation generated.⁷ This included men who felt that, overall, their mental health was “good,” and those who were more clearly struggling.

For example, Glen, who admitted to struggling with loneliness and depression, told us that the Men’s Shed helps **“in a big way”**.

“Any week that I have been unable to attend,” he continued, **“I have felt a little more sad. It lifts my spirit. I get together and share laughs and conversation with people who have become my good friends.”**

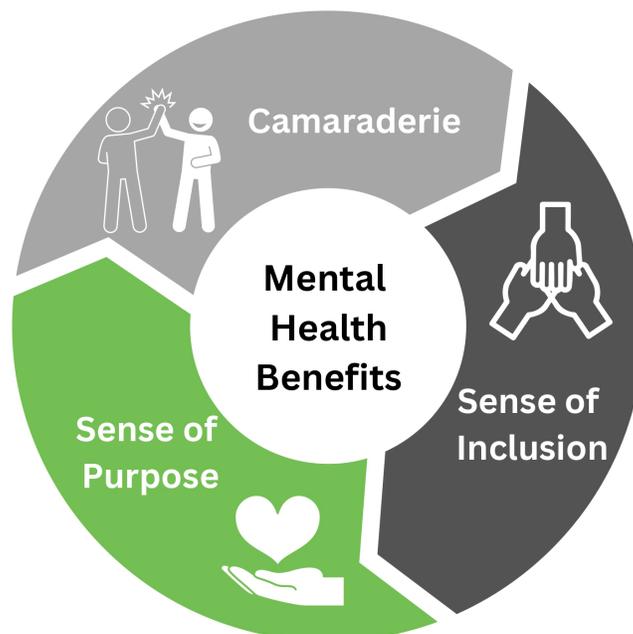
Glen further stressed the value of the Men’s Shed given that, in his experience, it is rare to find men’s groups that help men talk about their loneliness. The loss of the Shed, he continues, would be **“a considerable loss in my life.”**

David, after describing his mental health struggles, admitted that **“I don’t feel like doing that much....I feel – not that I don’t feel good. It’s not sad. I don’t feel happy...”** but **“mentally I think [the Men’s Shed] is making me a bit better. I’m not as blasé [as I am] at home.”**

Max was similarly direct about the mental benefits the Men’s Shed has on him: **“I was suffering from - still do-suffer from depression, but it’s changed for the better since I joined.”**

Bob added, **“I look forward to it. When you come here the rest of the world goes away. Your mind is on the Men’s Shed, and making things happen...[I]f you’ve got a problem, you can tell [the other members]. I don’t know if they can do anything with it, but they will definitely talk you through it...And before you are done you aren’t even mad anymore.”**

While such comments make clear the mental health benefits for a variety of participants, the longer responses provided by study participants often went into more detail with respect to the specific ways that their engagement with their Men’s Shed led to these benefits. Next, we discuss the three most prevalent, and admittedly interrelated, factors that helped generate these clear benefits.



CAMARADERIE

Camaraderie was often the exact word used by many of the participants when describing what they experience in their Men's Shed. In essence, camaraderie was described as fellowship and sharing many forms of connections, often with laughter being at the centre. Walter offers his description of how he experiences camaraderie in his Men's Shed: **"the companionship and camaraderie that shows up when you get a group all together in here, a lot of laughing going on and a lot of BS-ing."**

The sense of community, the talking, sharing and connecting with one another, that results from the camaraderie present in these Men's Sheds was also apparent. As Bob explains: **"I meet people that I wouldn't normally meet. That's the big benefit...basically...in a nutshell it's camaraderie, it's what we are like, it's that simple. When you come here the rest of the world goes away."** Walter adds that the Men's Shed is a place for men to come and talk to one another; that it's a place **"to be shoulder to shoulder and just be able to relate with each other."**

Importantly, the overall sense of camaraderie experienced by participants was very much rooted in these Sheds being specifically "men's" clubs.

"Men don't think the same as women and women can have card clubs, Canasta or Bridge clubs, and quilting clubs, that sort of thing. We create a place for men to come where they can talk to other men, which they will do, whereas they wouldn't talk about problems with women, sometimes not even their wives."

-Warren, participant of a rural Alberta Men's Shed

A SENSE OF INCLUSION

A second theme, very much related to the broader sense of camaraderie felt by participants, was that of "feeling included." That is, participants often spoke of feeling included, of feeling welcomed, and of feeling welcomed no matter their age or background. The notion of feeling accepted for "who they are" was noted by many participants. Bob explains, **"I meet people that I wouldn't normally meet. That's the big benefit. They're all down to earth, there's no fear there, you're all even level keel...it's that simple."** Evan, who described himself as too old and in too poor of health to participate in the physical projects undertaken by the group, happily reported that he was still welcome to **"do official supervising."** He added, with a smile, **"You always feel welcomed...they'll greet you when you come in....I've never seen them snub anybody..."** Mark adds: **"You can come in here and talk...you don't have to bring anything but a good attitude."**

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

The men from both Men's Sheds frequently described experiencing a "sense of purpose" as a significant benefit of their participation. For them, a sense of purpose encompassed the value of being of service to their broader community, of being able to help one another, and to continually learn new things.

In both Men's Shed's we visited, there was a high level of service to their communities, often rooted in shared woodworking projects that were then donated to various local groups. This included building little library boxes, planter boxes, cat condos, soccer equipment boxes and making comfort birds for residents at a nursing home. Many men highlighted the value of being able to "work with your hands...[and] make something that other people will appreciate." As Evan noted, **"at least you feel that the club is doing something. And I think [we all] feel like [we are] doing a meaningful thing when we are accomplishing something there."**

Many of the men we interviewed also talked about the value of learning new things at the Men's Shed and how this facilitated a sense of purpose. For Kevin **"it's a place to come and learn...you're learning and doing something with your hands. I wanted to learn [something about] some tools and you'll learn from somebody else [too]."** Rick enjoys watching other men showcase their various skills: **"they occasionally bring stuff like that in and show them to the men and it's quite fascinating. It challenges us to say 'oh, maybe I could do something, you know? It gives us ideas."**

Finally, several men also stressed the value in fueling a sense of purpose through helping each other. As Wendell explained, **"One guy has got a problem at home? We help them if we can...No problem....we will help them."**

"It's a bonding experience for men, you know? Men, you know, men don't bond or, you know...they don't open up a whole lot, right? And this is kind of a non-threatening situation and, you know, some men open up"

-Rick, participant of a rural Alberta Men's Shed

“The Shed got me away from the house and got me in touch with other people that I can relate to, I can learn new things from them and they can learn new things from me.”

- Bob, participant of a rural Alberta Men’s Shed



Conclusions & Key Recommendations

The two Men's Sheds we worked with in rural Alberta generate a myriad of benefits that support the mental health and well-being of participants. Not only did many of the men interviewed speak openly about the ways in which their participation in a Men's Shed helped them with serious mental health issues like loneliness, grief, and depression, they were also largely in agreement as to the various ways this occurred. The men we interviewed experienced strong senses of camaraderie, inclusion, and purpose via their participation and it is clear that these three factors are absolutely critical in terms of understanding why Men's Sheds seemingly generate such positive mental health benefits for members.

Thus, given that such Sheds can often be funded at a relatively inexpensive level, they are designed to be largely "self-run," and they seem so well-suited to generating positive mental health benefits in a population that is notoriously reluctant to seek out formal mental health support, they present as an incredibly valuable tool in the struggle to offer appropriate and effective mental health resource to rural communities.

Indeed, we assert that supporting the formation of new Men's Sheds throughout rural areas represents a worthwhile investment in the mental health of a group of vulnerable citizens on behalf of rural municipalities and provincial governments.

Of course, Men's Sheds should not be viewed as a panacea for the complex and widespread problem that a lack of proper mental health supports presents for rural communities. Far more is required from governments and communities to ensure a whole host of additional services are made available, and that traditional stigmas that prevent access are overcome, for all rural citizens.

But, we strongly recommend that community social service organizations in rural areas seriously consider supporting the creation of a Men's Shed in their community.

Conclusions & Key Recommendations - con't

Yet, it is worth noting that, for both Sheds we worked with, challenges do exist. For instance, the presence of a strong and respected leader within the Shed was frequently highlighted as being important, as was the sense that it was “the men,” and not the broader community organization that supports them, or “an outside social worker,” who were making decisions with respect to group activities and such. Strong leadership by “one of the men”, and the broader sense of autonomy for the group, seems to be a key ingredient in what makes these Sheds comfortable and safe places for participants. Thus, a certain amount of care (and luck?) is required at the outset should any community organization be interested in supporting the creation of a Men’s Shed in their community to ensure the program does not feel like “a program” run by social service professionals.

More specifically, Sheds require an individual with strong leadership skills and a capacity and willingness to shoulder much of the responsibility around organizing and leading the group, but can still be “one of the guys.”

That said, although members of both Sheds exhibited a preference for a degree of autonomy from the community social service organizations that technically oversee them, it is clear that the support these organizations provide, both in terms of providing modest funding but also in terms of writing grants on the Shed’s behalf and ensuring they have a physical place for the men to meet, is often critical. This means that a careful balancing act must take place, and will likely require compromise on the part of both the men participating in the Shed and the broader community social service organization that supports the group.

Indeed, we recommend contacting the Canadian Men’s Shed Association in order to assist efforts aimed at creating a Men’s Shed in your community. The Association even has a “toolkit” designed to help you start this journey.⁸

Notes:

1. See the Men's Shed Canada website at: <https://www.mensshedsCanada.ca/NationalOrg/Timeline/>
2. Barry Golding and Cory Mackenzie, "Men's Sheds in Canada," in *Shoulder to Shoulder: Broadening the Men's Shed Movement*, ed. Barry Golding (Common Ground Publishers, 2021)
3. Wendy Leung, "Men's Sheds: Where guys tinker and improve 'health by stealth,'" in *The Globe and Mail*, September 21, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/article-mens-sheds-where-guys-tinker-and-improve-health-by-stealth/>
4. Barry Golding, *Shoulder to Shoulder: Broadening the Men's Shed Movement* ed. Barry Golding (Common Ground Publishers, 2021), 4.
5. See: Megan L. Ballinger, Lyn A. Talbot, and Glenda K. Verrinder, G.K, "More than a place to do woodwork: A case study of a community-based Men's shed," in *Journal of Men's Health*, 6(1), 2009, 20-27, and Renie Cordier and Nathan Wilson, "Community-based Men's Sheds: promoting male health, wellbeing and social inclusion in an international context" in *Health Promotion International*, 29(3), 2013, 483-93.
6. Rebecca Barry, Jurgen Rehm, Claire De Oliveira, Peter Gozdyra, Simon Chen, and Paul Kurdyak, "Rurality as a risk factor for attempted suicide and death by suicide in Ontario, Canada," in *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 67(9), 2021, 679-689.
7. All the names of study participants have been changed in this report to protect the anonymity of study participants
8. Find this resource at: <https://www.mensshedsCanada.ca/ShedsAndActivities/StartingAndRunningAShed/>

Leading with Purpose.



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